

# 13<sup>th</sup> IRDR Annual Conference: Risk Without Borders

Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2023, 9:00 am – 7:00 pm

## RAPPORTUER REPORT

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Challenging both physical and metaphorical borders; the 13<sup>th</sup> IRDR Annual Conference hosted a series of thought-provoking talks, panel discussions and networking opportunities in attempt to present and generate possible solutions when assessing, managing, and reducing disaster risk and the impact of humanitarian crises. Borders were recognised from formal and informal perspectives both economic and political – considering the impact of data, communication, and collaboration in the context of real modern-day problems.

Students, practitioners, and researchers alongside the public were welcomed by the Institute for Risk and Disaster Reduction (IRDR), as the conference opened its doors to the impact of borders on disaster risk, enabling the collaboration of knowledge and possible solutions from guest-experts across various fields. Presented were global perspectives on the multi-dimensional aspects of disaster risk reduction, from the contexts of natural disasters to armed conflict, among many others. The relationship between both data and science in the context of borders was explored through interactive discussions and in conversation, while themes of agency and diplomacy were explored through talks and presentations. All efforts were seen to channel to one common goal, posed by Professor Joanna Faure Walker in the conference's opening speech: *'How can we catalyse change?'*

Time BST	Programmed Event
09:15 – 09:30	Welcome speech by Professor Joanna Faure Walker
09:30 – 10:45	Keynote Speech: Professor Stefan Dercon, Economic Policy at Blavatkin School of Government: Agency, Anticipation and Disaster Risk Reduction [Chair: Dr Rozana Himaz]
10:45 – 11:15	Break
11:15 – 12:15	In Conversation with Judge Mykola Gnatovskyy, European Court of Human Rights [Chair: Dr Yulia Ioffe]
12:15 – 12:45	Professor Ilan Kelman, UCL IRDR: Disaster Diplomacy
12:45 – 14:00	Lunch Break
14:00 – 15:30	Panel 1: Data without Borders [Chairs: Dr Saman Ghaffarian & Dr Ting Sun]
15:30 – 16:00	Break
16:00 – 17:30	Panel 2: Scientists beyond Borders [Chair: Professor Fatemeh Jalayer]
17:30 – 17:40	Closing Remarks
17:40 – 19:00	IRDR PhD poster exhibition and networking reception

## Conference playlist:

[https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLi9vmTDePsrd8qyAWUaWwOaRIM3479FSf&si=IS\\_BfSpJI BLDbpkR](https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLi9vmTDePsrd8qyAWUaWwOaRIM3479FSf&si=IS_BfSpJI BLDbpkR)

## Keynote Speech: Agency, Anticipation and Disaster Risk Reduction

### Speaker

Stefan Dercon, Professor of Economic Policy, Blavatkin School of Government, Oxford

### Chair

Dr Rozana Himaz, IRDR

### Summary

Focussing on the need to set up a stronger public response system in the face of natural disasters, Professor Stefan Dercon placed the use of anticipatory social action at the forefront of a revolutionised disaster response. This was proposed as means of adapting current systems and structures, an evidence-based approach proving successful in both Bangladesh and Niger in recent times.

Dercon argued for the utilising of advanced analytical data now available - a prospective solution in an ever-increasing social and geopolitical climate.

Criticised was a belief in principle alone; and its manifestation within modern-day humanitarianism – *'slow, politicised and insufficient decision making, causing an underfunded and fragmented response'*. An alternative to the so-called *12<sup>th</sup> century begging bowl* method of collecting aid was replaced with Anticipatory Action – posed as a faster, reliable, and well targeted data driven response. This was built on robust forecasting and decision-making framework, prearranged financing, and established action plans, leading to aid's delivery through cash transfers. This would be incremental for both regular social protection, and seasonal depravities.

Evidence of a trigger-based system's success was seen in Bangladesh's Jamuna River Flooding in 2020, proving the effectiveness of both the forecast algorithms and the anticipatory action plans themselves. A later impact evaluation highlighted ways in which such relief actively improved both welfare and agency of recipients – increased at a critical juncture in time. Early warning action was further commended; used to combat peak food insecurity during bouts of seasonal hunger in Niger; allowing for more recipient led control regarding decisions. The biggest challenge posed by Dercon was the ability to 'convince' politicians – a history of political bickering costing the livelihoods of many, making pre-arranged finance harder to organise in practice.

Professor Dercon's speech was followed by a Q&A session; questions of which challenged the scalability of such a solution. To this, Dercon highlighted his intention to weave anticipatory action into the plumbing of humanitarian response; utilising the processes and systems currently in place to improve. Further raised were questions regarding the effectiveness of Dercon's willingness to 'tie the hands of the politician', to which was responded with the need for collaboration across politics, encouraging ways of conveying

anticipatory action as a means of flag planting for politicians themselves – incentivising the response for all.

## In Conversation

### **Presenter**

Judge Mykola Gnatovskyy, European Court of Human Rights

### **Chair**

Dr Yulia Ioffe, IRDR

*How does international law address migration?* To explore this question; Judge Mykola Gnatovskyy and Dr Yulia Ioffe recognised the different perspectives of physical borders; across countries, states, and regions. Using Dr Gnatovskyy's personal role serving as judge elected in respect of Ukraine; and the current conflict seen within its borders, discussed was whether the European Court of Human Rights was the best place for issues regarding armed conflict. Suggested was the need for adaptation – the adoption of International Humanitarian Law perhaps a suggestion aiding the disintegration of barriers. A current mixing of independent legal regimes has arguably led to a lack of consistency in approaches; the current interstate applications leading to a huge deployment of resources – and an active need for a revised budget.

Further discussed were issues regarding migration in the UK; an *aggressive anti-migration rhetoric* leaving the court urged to protect both migrants and asylum seekers. Dr Gnatovskyy used this to place importance on emphasising the decriminalisation of the migrant, urging for the re-evaluation of their treatment, and allowing this to raise interesting political questions regarding the credibility of current UK governments.

Acknowledging the difficulties that a liberal pro-migration mentality would cause a government and its country; an alternative blame on migrants is not the solution – and rather; with current shifts ensuing with the problematisation of Russia's role as a permanent member of the UN Security Council; the transgression of fundamental principles was argued by Dr Gnatovskyy to lead to the '*counterproductivity of pessimism*'. Instead, current lack of tangible repercussions for a noncompliance of human rights according to human rights law; seen recently in both Azerbaijan and Türkiye, leads to the unfortunate conclusion of a fragmented system. The question remaining unfortunately unanswered: is ensuring state compliance a role of the European Court of Human Rights? And if not – what changes need to take place?

## **Disaster Diplomacy**

### **Presenter**

Ilan Kelman – IRDR

*'A peace deal was created amidst the death of 130,000'.* Ilan Kelman began his speech referring to the Indonesian Tsunami of 2004 – speaking of the tragic circumstances of which emerged a remarkable consequence – peace talks between the Acehese and the Indonesians. This led a multitude to question the value of disaster as perhaps a trigger leading to peace – Kelman posed to the audience: *'Did the peace deal come from the tsunami?'*

This was followed by the ways in which disaster activities influence political decisions – instead shining a light on the many pre-existing bases; secret negotiations, and misplaced priorities that take place with great prominence on the political landscapes; far prior to any disasters.

A blame was placed on politicians, power hungry with a main and sole focus on economic resource consolidation. Rather, Kelman reiterated the peace deal as an option that was always there – the devastation used as an excuse; not causal.

Kelman concluded inspiringly: *'The key to a disaster is not the hazard, but the vulnerability. It is our responsibility to be active; get involved.'*

## **Panel Discussion 1 - Data Without Borders**

### **Presenters**

Dr Mehmet Askit – University of Twente, The Netherlands

Dr Ainslee Johnstone – The Economist, UK

Dr Samantha Burgess – ECMWF

### **Chairs**

Dr Saman Ghaffarian – IRDR UCL, UK

Dr Ting Sun – IRDR UCL, UK

Upon recent technological advances enabling unprecedented access to an extensive range of data; ways in which this can be used to reduce the risk of a disaster were explored from a range of viewpoints by the panellists – looking at ways in which open access data actively removes borders – enabling better discussions to take place, and better decisions to be made.

## **Key Points of the Session**

### Dr Mehmet Askit

*Which processes and procedures are used to manage disasters?* From data gathering to distribution of goods, to task generation – Dr Askit resided his argument in the believe that these processes would perform best as automated structures. His lasting advice: *‘consistency is the key in data architecture’*.

### Dr Ainslee Johnstone

Focussing on personal experience as a data journalist for The Economist, UK – Dr Johnstone pondered the ways in which data is used to tell stories across borders – looking at common principles with data story telling. This included the need for visual appeal, short simple phrases, and often a singular focused takeaway point. Comparable to a short tutorial on how to convey a message using data successfully and efficiently – Johnstone placed one last set of importance on the need to give context to data findings: all ways of enabling and allowing the free flow of data across borders.

### Dr Samantha Burgess

Noting the high levels of observance on the planet in the world of today; Dr Burgess uncovered the uses of Copernicus Climate Data – it’s provision of open-access climate data allowing for a substantial increase in informed climate driven decision making. Through the likes of climate projections and weather predictions, extreme events from the past now remain open to complete digital reconstruction. This enables the analysis of their impact and can be used in a variety of ways – for example to train AI weather prediction models.

### Dr Saman Ghaffarian

Dr Ghaffarian highlighted the usefulness of AI machine learning in the context of post-disaster recovery – a branch of artificial intelligence that allows for the improvement of computers through experience. This, paired with deep learning, was argued to lead to extra insights; accurately detecting damages following a disaster.

## **Panel Discussion**

Unanimously agreed on was the difficulties faced when dealing with data at the hands of borders – information production; alongside the ability to share and collaborate it. Further challenges with the increasingly large-scale use of AI were discussed, deep-fake maps of disasters reemphasising a huge importance on the need to credit and verify data before drawing conclusions.

## Panel Discussion 2 - Scientists Beyond Borders

### **Presenters**

Dr Carla Washbourne - UCL, UK

Dr Dan Haines - University of Bristol, UK

Dr Anawat Supasri - Tohoku University, Japan

### **Chair**

Professor Fatemah Jalayer – IRDR UCL, UK

Acknowledging the difficulties of transcending boundaries between both scientists and researchers; this panel attempted to tackle these challenges, instead finding solutions lying within scientific collaboration and knowledge exchange. This discussion addressed the ways in which barriers to scientific collaboration can be overcome by fostering open science initiatives, dialogue, and engagement.

### Dr Carla Washbourne

*'So how do we break the boundaries between science and policy?'* Dr Carla Washbourne explored three examples of science policy interfaces, considering the relations between scientists and other actors. These spanned from a local to global level – Green Space City Lab for London, Eklipse, and IPBES.

Upon brief explanations of all three, and their differing ways of collaborating and synthesising knowledge across a board of fields all for common objectives regarding biodiversity and ecosystems, Dr Washbourne displayed the challenges of current barriers in the field. Scope, time, and resource commitments appeared as great limitations at both regional and global level – but despite this, remained greatly outweighed by the vast opportunities that uncovered at the hands of cross cutting interdisciplinary engagement.

### Dr Dan Haines

Exploring the role of historians in a seismic context, Dr Dan Haines further exemplified ways in which collaboration across fields can be utilised effectively, discussing both social analysis and data mining to look at colonial responses to earthquakes in South Asia.

Urging for the essential need to respect and understand differing methodologies, Haines' experience in Bhutan studying cataclysmic events reiterated the linkage between policy makers; social scientists and historians, embedding the power of collaboration.

Acknowledged were limitations seen in personal experience; of both niche studies and linguistic barriers – further worsened by a potential lack of ethnography. Dr Haines successfully conveyed the ways in which collaboration across unlikely fields can be of upmost use regarding current disasters.

## Dr Anawat Supasri

Focussing on ways in which international scientific collaborations can help tackle disaster risks, Dr Supasri focussed on Tsunamis – and the effectiveness of international survey teams in collecting data. Emphasised was the importance of an interdisciplinary approach, a growing international scientific network actively engaging in modernised information sharing, saving lives, and evolving disaster risk reduction.

## **Closing Remarks – Professor Joanna Faure Walker**

Reflecting on the presentations and discussions of the day; Professor Joanna Faure Walker concluded; highlighting the importance of working across both barriers and borders. Instead, she proposed the need to continue asking the right questions at the right time, suggesting engaging in an optimism when handling the years to come:

*'If we don't try, we won't do.'*

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**Conference Rapporteur: Iman Chaudhry**

**Conference Organiser: Sarah Jeal**

**IRDR PhD Poster Exhibition Convener: Phillip Cunliffe**

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